



December 19, 2008

The Chancellor's Notes



Thoughts from Chancellor Michelle Rhee on learning, schools and system-wide reforms in DC Public Schools

December 19, 2008

Students' Voices: What do They Have to Teach Us?

I am fortunate to meet often with many experts in the field of education, but they do not quite match the more than 46,000 schools experts I talk to as often as I can: our students. From the first grader who tugged on my sleeve recently to inform me that he decided I had been right to close his school last year, to the high school students who pressed me to tackle their concerns swiftly and without excuses—I am ever aware of our children's astute powers of observation. They understand what we communicate to them through the educational environments we provide, often knowing our priorities and beliefs about them even when we are not aware we have communicated them.

Last week I met with members of my student cabinet, which includes 25 student leaders who represent over 46,000 students. Meeting with them is a highlight of my month. This is a chance for me to hear from students in a more substantive way than school visits allow, and, through the members of this group, to engage more of our students to become active participants in their own education.

Contributions by Last Year's Cabinet

When the Cabinet convened last year, immediately I was on the "hot seat." Cabinet members put together a long list of ways in which their schools could and should be improved. I am a firm believer in using data and metrics to measure progress, but there is no accountability like the student who is sitting before you with big dreams, asking how she is supposed to achieve those dreams when her transcript is incorrect and incomplete. If you work with children, you already know that nobody keeps us more honest or drives us to be better at our adult responsibilities.

Ultimately, last year's cabinet members were involved in solving the problems they brought to the table. Students did so much more than drop a list of grievances at my door. As student leaders, they actively engaged in the process of school reform.

For example, after they identified nutrition and school food as a problem in their schools, they became part of the solution. They were the taste testers for the new menus we brought to schools this year, and they worked with us and involved other city leaders in the changes they wanted to see. When student safety was a concern at one school, they encouraged their peers to contribute student voices to the solution, and brought their ideas directly to school leaders and to me.

As they increased their self-advocacy skills they became more interested in empowering other students to advocate for themselves and become active and involved participants in their own education. This year they

will create the goals that match their priorities, create the action plans that will move them toward those goals, and lead groups of students to reach their goals together.

This Year's Cabinet: Moving Forward

This year's cabinet has started off with a very different agenda. I was pleased to see that many of the concerns that were at the top of the list last year are no longer there. In speaking on what students liked about their schools, many mentioned improvements that were made last year: more modern school facilities, the positive effects of new school leadership, better and more nutritious food that more students are eating.

Other items remain, however. Some cited specific examples of improvements in school security, while others flagged student safety and truancy as real concerns. Students also continued to emphasize the importance of good teaching.

Students Asking us to Challenge Them

If there was one concern that dominated their conversation, it was college readiness. They are eager to go to college—some have already been accepted at excellent schools—yet many in the group feel unprepared for college-level work and for the transition to college. They asked for more AP courses, more honors courses, and better overall preparation.

Only 9% of our DCPS ninth graders graduate from college within five years and our students are as worried about this as we are. Our children desperately want to be held to high expectations, and I cannot count the number of conversations I have had with students who are telling us we are not challenging them enough.

The Importance of Students' Voices in Adult Decisions

One student stood up at a full conference table in the middle of last week's cabinet meeting and asked, "Why does the press only report the bad things that happen at my school? Can somebody report the good things that students do all the time?" Another student wants all of you to know the many ways that students exceed adult expectations every day.

The students I have met are unafraid to make their voices heard, and I am confident that they will continue to use their voices to invoke and mobilize change. I look forward to seeing their leadership skills grow as they encourage the same qualities among students in schools in the New Year.

As students leave school for their holiday break today, their voices remain to ring in our ears as we make the plans and decisions that will affect them. I look forward to hearing more of their observations and ideas in 2009.

To our teachers and school staff who leave for a hard earned break over the next few weeks, thank you for engaging our children as active participants in the necessary—sometimes hard—conversations about their education. Thank you for hearing and honoring their voices (especially on the days when they have been a bit louder than you would prefer!).

Best to all of you over the holidays and in the New Year.

To reply to this e-newsletter, send an email to Peggy O'Brien, Chief of Family & Public Engagement, at Peggy.O'Brien@dc.gov

Please share this e-newsletter with colleagues and friends! If you know anyone who would benefit from receiving this e-newsletter, feel free to forward it.

If this e-newsletter was forwarded to you, please visit the following link to add your email address.
https://service.govdelivery.com/service/subscribe.html?code=DCWASH_140

For past editions of this e-newsletter, visit <http://www.k12.dc.us/chancellor/communiques/chancellorsnotes.htm>

This e-newsletter is provided to you by:

District of Columbia Public Schools (<http://www.k12.dc.us>)

Office of the Chancellor (<http://www.k12.dc.us/chancellor/communiques/chancellorsnotes.htm>)

825 North Capitol Street NE, 9th floor

Washington, DC 20002

202-442-5885